DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 701 EA 026 484

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TITLE An Evaluation Design for a Community School Cluster.
PUB DATE Oct 94
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Educational Research Association (Ellenville, NY, October 26-28, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Improvement; *Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; *Partnerships in Education; State Action; *State Aid; State Legislation; State School District Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Maryland (Montgomery County)

ABSTRACT

A cluster of schools in Montgomery County, Maryland, is working to meet the changing educational needs of its student population. The state of Maryland has developed partnerships with business and local service providers to improve school performance. House Bill 874 provided for Challenge School funds to help local schools reach Maryland's Schools for Success Goals by the year 2000. This paper presents an interim evaluation design that supported school-improvement plan (SIP) implementation, identified program-related activities and strategies, documented Challenge Schools' progress, and identified SIP outcomes. The Challenge School funding plan was implemented in 1993-94 in five elementary, one middle, and one high school. Quantitative and qualitative data collected at the school sites indicate that the program resulted in increased parent involvement and improved school/agency responsiveness to children and families. The role of the State Department of Education is expected to change from one of advisor/monitor to observer as schools take greater responsibility for self-evaluation. (LMI)

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ED 378 701

An Evaluation Design for A Community School Cluster

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Northeastern Educational Research Association
Ellenville, New York
October 26-28, 1994

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An Evaluation Design for a Community School Cluster

Antoinette Brown, Ph. D.

Background

A cluster of schools in Montgomery County, Maryland is working to meet the changing educational demands of its student population. The State of Maryland, the schools' main partner through Challenge Grant funds, has combined forces with businesses and local service providers to forge a school/agency cooperative effort. Together with parents and other community members, their efforts enable the schools to offer students and parents a variety of services to meet pressing needs.

The State of Maryland's House Bill Number 874 provided for Challenge Schools funds to support local schools in reaching Schools for Success Goals by the year 2000. Challenge Grant funding is intended to improve the schools' performance in terms of variables reported in the annual report card issued by the Maryland State Department of Education. Key variables include the following: attendance rates; drop-out rates; promotion rates; passing rates on functional tests in math, reading, writing and citizenship; and student achievement on assessment tests administered in grades 3, 5 and 8.

The Challenge Grant was authorized for three school years, from 1992-93 to 1994-95. In August of 1992, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) selected a cluster of five elementary schools, a middle school and a high school to develop and implement school improvement plans designed to address the needs of a high mobility and high-proportion ESOL population.

The first year (1992-1993) was a planning year during which each school improvement team (SIT) examined its school's needs and resources and developed an appropriate school improvement plan (SIP) with identifiable goals, objectives, implementation strategies and measureable indicators of progress toward the goals. The first year of implementation was 1993-94.

Statement of Purpose

Evaluation of school-based services can provide information about the effectiveness of the services, and also improve the delivery of services (Gomby and Larson, 1992). In the context of the Challenge Grant,

there were multiple clients for evaluation information, and each client had different points of view about the goals of the evaluation, and of the services provided by the Challenge program.

Among the various clients were the local school community, the county school system, the state department of education, and the state legislature. Because of the multiple clients and goals in this endeavor, the MCPS Department of Educational Accountability (DEA) explored, with the schools, an evaluation design that included a range of evaluation strategies, both formative and summative.

The design that emerged was determined by the school-community context in which the Challenge Grant was implemented and by the data needs of the school, the local school system and the state department of education. The process (formative) evaluation described the program activities, how the programs were implemented, who was involved, problems that arose, and successes that resulted. The outcome (summative) evaluation measured the progress toward established measureable goals and objectives, particularly those of the individual Challenge Grant School Improvement Plans (SIPs), the Montgomery County Success for Every Student goals, and the Maryland State Schools for Success goals.

The paper presents an interim evaluation design that supported the implementation of the SIPs, identified program-related activities and stratgies, documented Challenge schools' progress, and identified outcomes of the SIPs' activities.

Conceptual Framework

The long-range goal of the Challenge Grant evaluation was to contribute to the effectiveness of grant-funded activities and to enhance positive outcomes. DEA, as the unit conducting the evaluation, became an actor in the cooperative school/community effort rather than just an external evaluator. Using the "learning community" metaphor (St. John, 1992) DEA joined a group of people, all playing different roles, and all involved in learning together how to improve the outcomes of the Challenge Grant activities.

Relationships between DEA and other actors have been collegial rather than adversarial and roles flexible. DEA has retained an independent perspective, while at the same time, it has played a number of roles. Within the learning community DEA has acted as a collaborator, an educator, a learner, a mirror, a recorder, an advisor, and occasionally

as a critic.

St. John (1992) proposed three functions of evaluation within a learning community: to import information into the community; to create opportunities for interaction within the community; and to export information out of the community so that others can learn from the effort. For the first year, DEA's functions have concentrated on importing information into the learning community and to a lesser extent, exporting information out of the learning community.

Background

The State of Maryland's House Bill 874 provided for Challenge School funds to support local schools to reach Schools for Success Goals by the year 2000. The Challenge Schools program was designed to bring systematic change to low-performing schools through strategic planning, direct intervention, expanded opportunities, and resources - both human and financial. As a result of House Bill 874, twenty-nine schools in Prince George's County, Montgomery County, and Baltimore City school systems began a collaborative effort that requires school improvement teams (SITs) at each school to develop school improvement plans (SIPS). SIPs include parents, teachers, administrators, supporting service employees, business partners, and community members.

Written agreements were negotiated between the state and local superintendent and between the local superintendent and the school principal. The agreements focused funding and action on the school principal, SIT, and instructional program to improve school performance as measured against Maryland School Performance goals.The county's intention was that these seven schools would provide models of successful programs addressing the issues of high mobility and a large ESOL population.

From the school community's point of view, the aim of the school/agency cooperation was to make the school a center for community involvement in activities that can foster learning. The extra support services offered by the seven schools cost about $1,900,000 for the 1993 1994 school year. That amounts to only about $400 /child above the average $7,377 that Montgomery County spent in FY 93, but less than it would cost to provide these services at separate support centers.

The Target Population

The seven schools in the cluster share a number of demographic characteristics including racial and ethnic diversity, a high percentage of students with limited English proficiency, high student mobility, and a high percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price meals. African American, Asian American, and Hispanic students make up about 60% of the students in the cluster schools. The percentage ranges from 48% at ES 807 to 78% at ES 788.

In 1993 the percentage of limited English proficient students ranged from 6% at ES 807 to 12% at the high school. Students in the cluster with limited English proficiency tend to score below the cluster average on the state's functional tests. Because passage of these tests is required by the state for high school graduation, the low test scores are a deterrent for these students to earn a Maryland high school diploma.

The cluster schools have high student mobility rates for all ethnic and racial groups. The school mobility rate (entrants and withdrawals during the school year) in 1993 was over 30% in several schools within the cluster. About one-third of the students enrolled in the cluster are eligible for free or reduced price meals. The percentage ranged from 24% at ES 807 to 61% at ES 797.

School Improvement Plans

During the 1992-1993 school year, each Challenge school identified evidence of needs within the school community and prepared a school improvement plan that addressed those needs through specific strategies and established measureable goals and objectives.

Several common themes appeared in the goals and objectives presented by the seven schools in their SIPs. The first of these themes is the improvement of student achievement as reflected in better report card grades and higher scores on the Maryland School performance Assessment Program, with a focus on the achievement of students enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Common strategies to support this goal are the use of computer technology and greater parent involvement.

A second recurrent theme is the facilitation of the transition and adaptation of new students. Among those targeted are ninth grade students entering the high school and transfer students. A third theme is the improvement of the home/school connection, usually through improved

school outreach to parents. A number of schools have targeted parents of ESOL students and Limited English Proficient parents in particular. The fourth of the common themes is staff development, particularly to support improved student achievement.

Partners in the Challenge Grant effort have taken steps to reach their goals by adopting new initiatives and coordinating their activities. Four of the elementary schools coordinated a summer math program at one site to meet the needs of their lowest-performing students.

Middle School 812, which serves about 1,000 students in grades 6 through 8, offered extended day programs after regular classes and a summer camp. The elementary schools in the cluster offered Head Start classes, after-school programs, family resource centers, and services targeted to the ESOL community.

To draw older students and their parents, the high school offered an after school and evening program that includes an open study hall and computer lab, evening appointments for parents to meet with guidance counselors, and SAT/PSAT/TOEFL/CELT preparation. The teens also perform community service and tutor younger children at Wheaton cluster elementary schools.

While meeting school and community goals, efforts are also paying off in student performance outcomes in both reading and math and higher average student attendance rates.

Evaluation Design 1993-1994

The 1993-1994 evaluation design emerged from a collaborative process between DEA, the Challenge Grant facilitator, and representatives of the seven schools. The design addressed the need for both process and outcome evaluation at the program level, at the school site, and at the cluster level. The process evaluation was primarily school-specific. Each of the Challenge Schools was evaluated on the progress it made towards implementing its own SIP and on the outcomes resulting from that plan.

Program-specific data was collected for the purpose of improving specific programs and for identifying those programs that have the possibility of being replicated at other MCPS school.

The collected data also had to meet the needs of the various actors: state, county, service provider, and school community. The schools and service providers are interested in demonstrating that they are meeting the needs of the community. Schools must also submit evaluations to MSDE to show progress towards meeting school and state goals. The

legislature must be able to justify the expenditure of public funds. MSDE and the county require evidence that the schools are progressing toward state and local goals.

Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed for the process and outcome evaluation. Quantitative data collected routinely by the state, county and schools were supplemented by quantitative and qualitative data collected at the school sites.

The individual school improvement plans specified, for each goal, the desired outcomes, and the data that would be collected to document the outcomes (milestones). The plans specified that such milestones were to be collected quarterly. The approach adopted at the school sites was to work with the SITs to identify their data needs and to involve them in the design and implementation of the monitoring process.

The quantitative data methods included the analysis of routinely collected data such as enrollment, attendance, student mobility, promotion, drop out rate, county criteria-referenced test scores, Maryland School Performance Assessment Program results, SAT scores, PSAT scores, and report card grades.

Quantitative data was used to describe school characteristics (enrollment, numbers of students receiving special services, etc.) and to document outcomes that might be attributable to Challenge Grant projects (changes in SAT and PSAT scores, improvements in attendance, reduction of suspensions, etc.).

Schools also undertook site-specific studies about programs at that school. At some schools this involved the analysis of data such as discipline reports or school-administered tests. In other cases, schools, with assistance from DEA, designed, administered, and analyzed surveys that answered questions about Challenge Grant activities. Surveys were distributed to parents and teachers, and at the high school level, to students.

The quantitative data was reported in a series of school-specific tables that summarized school years 1992-1993 and 1993-1994. Tables were organized into four categories: student population characteristics (enrollment, student mobility, etc.); student participation (attendance rates); student attainment (promotion rates); and assessed student knowledge (test results). Data was generally presented for the School as a whole, and also disaggregated by sex and race/ethnicity to clarify the

impact of the programs on subpopulations.

A wide variety of qualitative data contributed to the process and outcome evaluation including DEA observations, principal observations, document reviews, interviews, and student portfolio assessment. Observations were made at each of the Challenge schools. An observer attended SIT meetings, team training provided by MSDE, and other Grant-related activities.

The qualitative data was reported in a narrative case report form that was roughly similar for each school and for the cluster as a whole. Drafts of the case studies were distributed for member checking to the SITs and other persons who provided information. Responses were incorporated into the narratives to produce a "negotiated outcome" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 , p. 211).

The original design stipulated the completion of two annual reports and two interim reports using a standard format to report narrative and quantitative information about each of the seven schools. The reporting design was modified frequently to meet the information needs of the multiple clients. Report formats during the first year have been as varied as was the data. They have included responses to telephone requests for information, a formal cluster-level report combining narrative and quantitative information, and school-specific evaluations required by the State of Maryland.

Roles in the Learning Community

DEA's function within the learning community during the first year ha been primarily to import information into the community.

DEA served this function by filling the role of an advisor providing technical assistance to other members of the learning community, particularly the schools. DEA assisted SITs with the development, administration and analysis of surveys, analyzed test results, and helped to design monitoring schemes. DEA worked with the schools to develop self-assessments that were required by the MSDE and that served as the basis of subsequent SIPs. The importing function will probably continue to be significant during the 1994-1995 school year.

A secondary function during the first year was to export information. This was accomplished by acting as a reporter to a number of clients, including the schools themselves, to the local and State Boards of Education, to MSDE, and to the State legislature. The information that has been reported has addressed primarily the process of implementing

grant-funded activities and less about outcomes of the process. During the second year, it is anticipated that the reporting function will take on more importance.

The function of creating opportunities for interactions within the community has not been explored much. Only one formal site visit was conducted by MSDE, although informal visits were made to Challenge schools by MSDE staff members. The seven school principals meet together regularly to coordinate their activities, but the only opportunities for the SITs to meet together have been during training conducted by MSDE. Additional agencies and business partners have joined the community in the second year of implementation. Exploring ways for participants to interact will be a priority for the learning community in the coming year.

Findings and Implications

Proponents of school-linked services have identified three elements that are required to achieve positive outcomes: comprehensive services, increased parental involvement, and responsiveness of schools and agencies to children and families (Gomby and Larson, 1992).

Our process evaluation documents the existence of at least two of these elements in Challenge schools: increased parental involvement and improved responsiveness of schools and agencies to children and families. The comprehensiveness of services provided to children and families does not now meet all the needs identified by the school communities and school improvement teams. Nevertheless, the preliminary summative evaluation has shown that there have been positive outcomes in terms of student attainment and achievement, and that there are successful programs with the potential for replicability.

In the last year of the Challenge Grant, the evaluation plan and methodology is evolving to meet the needs of the seven cluster schools and to meet the changing criteria imposed by the State of Maryland. During the first year of implementation, the process evaluation focused on documenting the history of the Challenge program as well as implementation. During the second year of implementation, the focus will shift slightly to emphasize the identification of successful programs with potential for replicability.

The roles of the various members of the learning community are also changing, including that of DEA. In the first year of implementation, DEA frequently acted as an advisor and educator. The original approach of

involving participants in the monitoring process required DEA to devote time to educating school staff about monitoring and evaluation procedures and assisting the SITs to develop monitoring schemes for self-evaluation. During the second year, it is expected that school staff will take on more responsibility for self-evaluation, allowing DEA to spend less time advising, and more time observing and reporting.

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